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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SANAA 001117

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TAGS: PREL MOPS YM  
SUBJECT: SAADA: MEDIA COVERAGE SUGGESTS HEAVY FIGHTING,  
QATARI MEDIATION

REF: SANAA 1022

Classified By: AMBASSADOR THOMAS C. KRAJESKI, FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: As the Saada conflict enters its fifth month, and even though journalists have been barred from traveling to Saada since late January, government, independent and opposition Yemeni media outlets continue to report on daily fighting throughout the governorate between Houthi supporters and government troops, and their respective tribal partners. The Houthis are reportedly developing their own media campaign in Saada with the establishment of an FM radio station. Media speculation on Qatari mediation to end the conflict persists. While it is virtually impossible to confirm which media accounts are accurate, reporting suggests that both sides to the conflict have stepped up fighting in an attempt to gain the upper hand over the other. END SUMMARY

June 2007: Fifth Month of Fighting

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¶12. (SBU) Independent and opposition Yemeni press outlets continue to report daily battles and skirmishes throughout many regions of the Saada governorate between al-Houthi supporters and government troops. This cable provides an overview of war reporting for the first week of June.

¶13. (SBU) WESTERN SAADA: On June 3 Al-Ayyam, an independent daily with wide national circulation, reported fighting in the western section of the governorate, specifically in Duhyan and Majz. Army units based east of Saada reportedly launched Katyusha rocket attacks on Duhyan and Bani Mu'ath area south of Duhyan. Eshteraki.Net, an online daily associated with the opposition Socialist Party, also reported on June 2 heavy fighting on the outskirts of Duyhan, which is Saada's second largest city and which has reportedly been under Houthi control for some time. (NOTE: For Yemenis, Duhyan also has symbolic importance as the former stronghold of the Imam, who was deposed over 40 years ago.) Both Al-Ayyam and Eshteraki.Net reported heavy fighting during the first several days of June in the Razeh district east of Saada City, with the result that Government forces reportedly re-took the town of Qala'a, which had been under Houthi control for at least two months.

¶14. (SBU) NORTHERN SAADA: During the first week of June, Al-Ayyam also described a three-day offensive by army units near Jebel 'Azaan (north of Talh), a successful government

artillery attack in the same area, and the seizure on June 4 of key entrances and roads near Matra, north of Tahl, enabling the Government reportedly to isolate several Houthi units in the area.

¶5. (SBU) SOUTHERN SAADA: Most Yemeni media outlets reported on May 31/June 1 that fighting between government and Houthi forces in Al-Layl, south of Saada City, resulted in the deaths of around six civilians. The army and Houthi insurrectionists allegedly exchanged heavy fire in and around a busy market area in that town. Eshteraki.Net also reported that followers of Sheikh Qaid Shuwait were killed while supporting army operations in the area of Dimaj, southeast of Saada in the al-Safraa district. (NOTE: Dimaj is the site of a well-known Salafist school of Islamic studies. END NOTE)

#### Battle of the Airwaves

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¶6. (SBU) MarebPress.Net, an independent online daily, and Al-Ayyam reported that the al-Houthi rebels launched an FM radio station in Saada in response to the government's recent television and radio media campaign. Al-Ayyam reported that local government authorities were actively combating Houthi propaganda with religious radio broadcasts, mosque lectures, and the distribution of taped lectures from various religious leaders warning about the dangers of sectarian conflict. Other news outlets reported that the Saada Governor and Minister of Religious Affairs inaugurated a new government radio station in Saada City that would be used to "spread peaceful religious principles and moderate thought."

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#### Rumors Of Qatari Mediation Persist

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¶7. (SBU) Local press continued to speculate on Qatari mediation to end the Saada war. Press reports that the Qatari Emir's mid-May visit to Sanaa was related to Saada were met by official Yemeni denials. Eshteraki.Net opined that presidential advisor and former prime minister Abdulkarim al-Iryani's recent trips to Qatar were related to mediation efforts, and both MarebPress.Net and Eshteraki.Net carried a statement by Abdul Malek al-Houthi, in which he mentioned the existence of Qatari mediation. Al-Houthi stated that he was waiting for an answer from the Yemeni authorities about an unspecified proposal. All media outlets also covered the June 6 visit to Sanaa of the Qatari prime minister, with the official Saba News Agency noting only that the official was "conveying a letter from the Emir of Qatar concerning brotherly relations."

¶8. (C) COMMENT: Although as recently as June 10 the Foreign Minister denied to the Ambassador that the Qatars were involved in mediating with the al-Houthis, media reports of these high-level visits (and credible post contacts) suggest that something is afoot. Similarly, the flurry of reporting on fighting throughout the governorate suggests that both sides of the conflict have stepped up their efforts to gain a definitive upper hand. Minister of Interior Alimi in a nationally televised press conference asserted that the Government had surrounded the last remnants of the rebel forces and that most of the governorate was "under control." On June 12, press reports quoted the Saada governor as saying that the rebels were "drawing their last breath." Only time will tell if the Government has in fact once again succeeded in containing the rebels. Even if the Government has gained the upper hand militarily, however, past experience demonstrates that lasting peace in Saada can only come with a comprehensive political settlement followed by significant economic development -- areas in which Qatari assistance could be very helpful indeed.

KRAJESKI